



Quaker House Belfast

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Dear Friends,

Greetings from a warm and sunny Belfast.

Patrick Murphy recently had an article about Northern Ireland in the Irish News with the title ‘A political third world country in the West’

‘While Britain and the rest of Ireland have evolved modern political systems in tune with advanced societies, we (i.e. Northern Ireland) opted for the medieval.

Thus politically we are a third world country: our major parties and systems are based on tribalism. At a social level, we are first world: we have as many cars, mobile phones and foreign holidays as other Western European states.

Our economic system is second world: it reflects the old Eastern European communist system where most wealth was generated through government spending. It may even be argued that we do not really have an economy, just a Westminster public sector hand-out delivered in a brown envelope.

So we live in three parallel universes: third world politics, second world economics and a first world society.’

I quoted from this article during my talk at a special interest group at Britain Yearly Meeting in York. Belfast has an apparent prosperity in the city centre and across the Province there is expensive new housing. There has been an expansion in the range of flights leaving for Europe, North America and weekends in eastern Europe, and Belfast has become a port of call for a number of cruise ships with bus-loads of Americans, Japanese and Russians ‘doing the sights’ of the city and being encouraged to spend their money. Parts of West Belfast have been declared a Eurozone, so that tourists can purchase goods locally without the need to change their Euros into Sterling. All seemingly proof of a buoyant community and a strong economy.

Employment figures reflect the state of the economy with 60% of the GDP derived from public services. 32% of the population are employed in this sector including 60% of the female employment. High levels of unemployment in certain areas such as parts of Belfast and in the more rural areas in the West of the Province, combined with low educational achievements is resulting in major problems, not only economic but also social. Some recent research looked at workers’ willingness to work in an area that was not of their own ‘side’ or to cross through such an area on their way to work. Few were prepared to do either, many stating that they would prefer to be out of work than to face the risk. There have also been some alarmingly high suicide figures – of about 800 between 2000 and 2004, many of whom have been young, disaffected males. A special task force has been established to look at the causes, which are multi faceted, in the hope that an

appropriate programme can be set up to address the many issues that are leading to this high suicide rate.

The peace process moves forward slowly and although the IRA statement at the end of July was welcomed as a positive step forward, many in the Province felt that they would believe the words when they saw some action. Against the hopes of an ending to violence and racketeering, destruction of arms and an achievement of normality, the loyalist feud between the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Loyalist Volunteer Force continues. The summer has had to cope with the usual parades and evidence of 'recreational rioting' by young teenagers and some orchestration by an older element in the crowds. There has been a rise in hate crimes, including racist and sectarian attacks and an increase in domestic violence. Reading the statistics and headlines in the newspapers can lead to a sense of despair but ever the optimist, I have been looking for 'green shoots'.

In addition to the IRA statement there has been evidence that some Orangemen have been willing to talk with local residents about the routing of marches. This has led to a reduction of tension in some areas. In London/Derry the local Chamber of Commerce took the initiative to enable the marchers to parade through the City, which they did peacefully for the first time for many years. About 18% of the Police Service of Northern Ireland are now Catholics and although latest figures indicate that only 6% of the children are being educated in Integrated Schools, a recent survey showed that 61% of people wanted children to be educated in schools with a mix of religions.

My work at Quaker House is progressing slowly, trying to identify the 'gaps', to support/initiate but not duplicate what is being done by others. I have been developing links with the Chinese and Muslim communities, working with others on anti-racism and formed the Quaker House Anti-Racism group with representatives from the Friends' Meetings in Northern Ireland and close links with Friends in the South. We are exploring a number of areas of work with which we could become involved and have organised our first conference for mid October. Sadly, this is a growing problem in Northern Ireland. I am also establishing dialogues between groups of people from different churches about some of the contentious issues in Northern Ireland that are rarely addressed outside people's comfort zone. These are important issues but can only move forward at a pace acceptable to the participants.

The work goes on in a warm and sunny climate – the best summer I have ever experienced in Northern Ireland. The garden at Quaker House is in full bloom and my neighbour's cat enjoys an especially warm spot under the fuschia bush. The mice have stayed away and while the students are on vacation there is relative peace at night and there is always somewhere to park my car! I make the most of the moment for I know that within a few weeks all will change!

I wish you well with your work.

Yours in Peace

Anne